



IF I had yielded to the influence of that gentle watchfulness which my mother found her chief occupation in extending, I am certain I should have escaped a strange happening that befell me; but I am prone to find some excuse for my perversity, even at this remote interval. In the first place, I imagined that I was very much in love with a pretty girl in the neighborhood named Alice Fairweather. It might appear that this was a matter serious enough, for I was only twenty and she was seventeen; and if there is anything in the world that will cause an only son's mother to worry, it is something so trivial as that.

But that was not all. One may imagine a mother with patience to wait until age and an unreliable discretion should enable a willful son to see the world (which generally, in the case of a boy, means women), and from a wider experience make a selection approximating an exhibition of intelligence. But there was something else (and a far more serious) to be considered. This was that I had a peculiar and painful affliction.

It is difficult for those not educated in nervous diseases to understand the distressing nature of my trouble. If I should say simply that I had asthma, the lay reader will recall memories of asthmatics who seemed to find their greatest pleasure in trying to breathe and in filling those about them with uneasiness. But sometimes chronic asthma means a great deal more than that. In my case it did. Let me try to make this easy to understand by saying that asthma is a nervous disease, and very often is associated with peculiar mental states and capacities. Some of the most puzzling studies that psychologists have encountered have been asthmatics; so that students of insanity have pretended to discover and classify certain forms of mental aberration which they refer to the presence of asthma. Whether or not this has anything to do with the strange story I am about to tell, I must leave it to the intelligent reader to infer.

Apart from my mother's anxiety for me on account of Alice Fairweather was her constant fear that I would summon my twelve little devils and their queen. I did not suspect then that she knew these creatures were given to visiting me on occasion; and how she discovered the fact I am at a loss to know. But I remember clearly that whenever the desire to receive a visit from these strange friends made itself manifest in some peculiar signs which I was not aware of giving, my mother would exercise a particular watchfulness over me, and would do all in her power to prevent me from sequestering myself for a moment. It is true that the desire to receive the visitation always immediately preceded a violent attack of asthma.

However, in spite of her care I often found opportunity to enjoy the society of my devils. The worst that had ever befallen me from their visits was great subsequent exhaustion, for the exercise of meeting and of being entertained by them was exacting and severe; but the visit of which I am now to tell had a very different ending. I would like to tell all I remember about my devils, but that would make this narration too long. I must content myself with relating what happened at this particular and most extraordinary visit, trusting that what may be allowed to fall therein will give a sufficient idea of the appearance and character of my friends. I will give only this preliminary hint: I call them devils because they were so jolly, good-

natured and polite; and I call Sinovia their queen because she seemed to govern them. For that matter, who but a queen of at least twelve devils could be so pretty and winsome as she?

It had been a long time since I suffered a severe attack of asthma, and the day came when I realized that a certain intense desire—stronger than any I had ever had before—to see my devils had taken possession of me. Perhaps it meant the imminence of a distressing illness, but I thought nothing of that at the time. By great good fortune I gave my mother the slip, intending to go at once to some quiet place where I might meet Sinovia and the devils; but before I could realize anything I found myself at Alice Fairweather's gate. Even this part of the strange occurrences of the evening is blurred and confused in my memory, and what happened after this sweetest of girls came to the gate (it was dark by this time), I have no recollection whatever. Concerning my mental state, however, there is more or less distinctness. I know that I was in a condition of peculiar exhilaration, in which everything seemed bright and beautiful. There was an unaccustomed buoyancy in my step and lightness in my tongue, so that I felt myself to walk without stepping and speak without uttering. I do not remember what I said to Alice, or what she said to me; I remember that I loved her with an ardor that was ready to encounter any risk. I remember clearly how beautiful she looked under the half-open shadow of a wind-shaken eucalyptus tree. The electric light on the corner shone brightly through the intervals of the leaves, which, moved by the breeze, cast shifting mosaic shadows on the sidewalk; and these shadows danced over Alice, also, clothing her dainty form in a curiously variegated gown of shifting tints, and now and then touching her brown hair with a golden hue that harmonized perfectly with the mellow light of her hazel eyes. These things are all very vague in my recollection, but I am convinced now that their relation to the after happenings of the evening had a certain cohesiveness.

I do not remember when I left Alice, nor what I said in parting. The night was sweet and beautiful, and filled with a restful but inspiring luminosity. The only clear recollection I have at this juncture is that I found myself in the rear room of a quiet hotel, where I had registered under an assumed name. I remember that I had gone there deliberately to call up Sinovia and my twelve little devils; so, after the boy had lighted the gas and left me, I locked the door, closed the window, and then, gleefully overcome with my victory over my mother, I tore up and down the room in ecstasy, laughing heartily. Then I sat down, rubbed my hands in lively anticipation over the pleasure I would have, and said:

"Come on with the boys, Sinovia, and let's have a lark."

Instantly Sinovia, the most beautiful and radiant of creatures, stood before me, and she was instantly followed by the twelve little



devils in the following order: Pelim, a little old man whose whiskers, a bright blue, grew only on his nose and fell to his chest, his bald head wrinkled curiously, and his eyes sharp and luminous; Sargopee, with his arms where his ears ought to have been, and a long tail growing from the back of his head; Jiruping, the bones of whose legs were articulated the wrong way, so that he always walked backward;

Wyaou, whose mouth was so wide that when he laughed he would rest the whole upper part of his head on his back; Suzp, a queer little chap whose feet were dogs, one yellow and the other red; Arloupetner, who could not keep his head on his shoulders, but had to carry it in his arms; Ri, the position of whose arms and legs was reversed, so that he had to walk upside down; Froup, a bright little fellow with four eyes in his face, two being where his nose and mouth belonged, and living caterpillars for hair; Mrtu, who wore no clothing whatever, in order not to conceal the effect of a powerful electric light within him which displayed the working of all his internal organs to the minutest details; Kiprit, very old but spry, with no bones in his body, so that he could get himself into the queerest shapes, a particular fancy being to swallow his feet at times; Seeprr, who had two heads, which grew in the place of his hands, and who lied dreadfully;



and, last of all, Thrig, a solemn rascal, whose body was filled with keys like those on an accordion, so that upon taking a deep breath he could play the most doleful tunes.

These all, following Sinovia, came one at a time, some emerging from the fireplace, others slipping through the keyhole, still others squeezing in under the door, and a few coming up out of the wastepipe of the washbasin. All were delighted to see me. None, I should explain, were larger than monkeys of medium size, and even Sinovia was smaller than a girl of her apparent age should have been, for I supposed her to be about seventeen years old.

The little gentlemen who had first arrived waited until all the others were on hand, and then very gravely and courteously, marshaled by Sinovia, they advanced and gave me formal greeting. This was all by-play, for we were old and intimate friends—I had seen them many a time before, and they were always the same; there had to be a certain amount of formality in the reception, but I knew that it meant nothing. After that was over, they began their pranks. It would be absurd for me to attempt a description of their extraordinary antics, or to repeat their smart and amusing speeches, for if I were to do so, I am sure I should be called a madman. But the essence of their fooling was this: They danced and capered about like the goblins they were, the merriest lot of nether-world beings it is possible to imagine. Their jokes, witticisms and comic songs were excruciating. They climbed upon me and dragged me about in the most undignified fashion, pulling me hither and thither, sitting on me, and subjecting me to all conceivable good-natured indignities, all together calling me the most outrageous names, and charging me with unimaginable crimes. They knew that I liked all this, and that the wilder they were the happier I became. I laughed till the tears streamed down my cheeks. They set me the queerest and most outlandish puzzles, and when I proved at fault in solving them they tormented me without mercy. In not a single instance could I outwit them. I had beforehand studied out the hardest possible riddles to fling at them, but they answered them almost before I had finished stating them, and then ridiculed my stupidity. I made no attempt whatever to maintain my dignity, for that

was out of the question; and I enjoyed it all so heartily that I forgot everything else under the sun.

Except Sinovia. She acted somewhat strangely that night. On former occasions she had been very quiet, sitting at my side and enjoying the merriment with me, now and then correcting some bold imp who attempted to carry the frolic to the verge of rudeness. She had always been so quiet, and sweet, and gentle, that I had taken hardly any notice of her, though conscious that through her gentle firmness the entertainments had been kept within enjoyable bounds. I had hardly ever looked at her during these impish visitations, feeling comfortable and satisfied that her beautiful and radiant presence was beside me.

On this particular evening her conduct was so markedly different that I began to observe her with a closer scrutiny, and although I did this furtively, so as not to alarm her attention, I put care in it sufficient to see some unexpected things. I had always noticed (though so vaguely as hardly to have formed an intelligent impression) that she resembled Alice; that is to say, although smaller than Alice, she was about of her age, and had her general appearance, including the brown hair, hazel eyes, and pretty mouth. But whereas Alice was always the same—always sweet and pretty, and young and dainty—I caught fleeting glimpses of remarkable changes in Sinovia's face. Once or twice I detected anger, impatience, and petulance, and again the downy bloom of girlhood would yield to an old, careworn and wrinkled face. Perhaps this was because she was having so much trouble to keep the mischievous little devils within decorous bounds. It was very pretty to see how cheerfully they obeyed her, but it was evident that the very mischief was in them that night, and they were difficult to control. I am not positive that this was the whole cause of her manifest discomfort.

Matters grew worse as the revelry proceeded. The unconscionable little imps became more and more hilarious, and with this accession of indecorum Sinovia became more and more imperious and arbitrary. Thus far she had the devils under control, and I am constrained to believe that she never dreamed that her domination over them would ever receive even a strain. But when matters had gone so far that she realized the presence of dangerous insubordination, she arose with a blanched face and flashing eyes and commanded the devils to disperse.

It was high time she did so, for they had passed the limitations of fun and were making the evening a sorry one for me. This was the first time such a thing had ever happened, and I had suffered at their hands for several minutes before I realized that malice had entered into the spirit of their entertainment, and that they were bent upon annoying and hurting me. It was after it had become perfectly clear that the little rascals were in serious mischief that Sinovia rose, pale and threatening, and commanded her imps to desist.

They saw instantly that she was very much in earnest, and this caused them to pause and consider, but it was only for a moment. They regarded one another slyly, and significant nods and winks passed around with incredible swiftness; so that in a moment after Sinovia had drawn imperatively upon her authority there was open mutiny in the ranks. She saw it, and her stout heart quailed. She made one heroic effort to sweep them before her out of the room, but it was of no avail, and before either she or I could realize the situation we were at the mercy of a howling and shrieking lot of little devils. All the dreadful iniquities of which they were possessed sprang into dangerous activity, and with a harmony of movement which seemed to give evidence of a previous understanding they sprang upon Sinovia and me, tearing our clothing and hair, pinching and biting us, reviling us with the most shocking language, and belaboring us with their hard little fists and everything else that came within their reach.

It surprised me amazingly to see how helpless and frightened Sinovia had suddenly become. In these entertainments I had never regarded her heretofore as a directing entity. I had looked upon her more as an accompanying adornment than as a controlling factor. Now, however, it was clear that unusual conditions had intruded themselves. I had hardly time to reflect on the history and character of Sinovia, and yet all at once I felt that with her influence gone everything was at odds with order and my safety. The little devils had

always appeared to obey me alone; that is to say, whenever I would tire of their pranks I would dismiss them, and they would retire without a protest, but it now quickly occurred to me that they never had really done anything without Sinovia's consent. Though so pretty, and sweet, and gentle herself, she nevertheless was, and all along had been, the mistress of the most desperate gang of little devils it is possible to imagine. In the whirling agonies of the next few minutes I remembered many things that now seemed to find a peculiar delight in occupying what little attention I could divert from a sudden and urgent self-protection.

Vaguely there came forth out of the limbo of my suffering a recollection of a strange resemblance between Sinovia and Alice Fairweather; perhaps it was my very tender regard for Alice that brought this apparent likeness into review. Whatever it was, the association was sufficient to make me wholly reckless of danger, now that Sinovia's safety was imperiled. It was maddening to see her standing quivering with fear, while the demons were wild with the spirit of mutiny and destruction. Already they had torn her clothing and hurt her in many places. It is true they had shown me similar attentions, but I cared nothing for that now. Sinovia was in danger, and Sinovia resembled Alice. This brought me into a condition of recklessness that cares little for the character of means to an end.

Thrusting Sinovia behind me, I defied the little demons, and, with chair upraised, challenged them to approach. They stood off and laughed at me in the most tantalizing manner. I had to advance far enough into the room to enable me to swing the chair to purpose and without danger of striking Sinovia behind me, and no sooner had I done this than the devils surrounded me and Sinovia, and quickly overpowered us and bore us to the ground. Then he of the blue nose-whiskers hissed into my ear:

"Fool, we have nothing against you. All that you have to do to secure complete control over us is to marry our queen!"

What! marry the queen of the devils, when in a few years I would be free to marry Alice? It was unthinkable. Sinovia had heard the proposition, and she looked at me wistfully. Really, I had never seen her look so charming before. In all the world there was only one other lovelier face, and that was Alice's. But what mattered that? Here was Sinovia in trouble, regarding me with a most enchanting expression. She was really very charming, and all at once I recalled the many kindly acts she had done for me. It was through her that I had been enabled so often to enjoy the society of the twelve little devils—devils now no longer, but demons, every one of them. What had Alice ever done for me to compare with all that Sinovia had done? And, then, if a man wants to get on in the world, what better help could he have than twelve devils?

The rascals waited patiently for my answer. What could I do? Was it in human power to be so ungracious as to say I would not marry this radiant creature beside me, when the modest pleading of her eyes and attitude so strongly reinforced the demand of the devils?

\* \* \* It might be possible to explain everything to Alice. She was really a very sweet girl, and it would be cruel to break her heart without making some kind of excuse. \* \* \*

I turned around and took Sinovia's hands in mine. She hung her head and blushed violently. I asked her if she thought she could

be happy as my wife, and for reply she began to cry, and then she buried her face in my arm.

I am somewhat surprised that I can remember thus far with so extraordinary distinctness; but at times, especially in asthma, there is a mental sublimation that sweeps all experience out of calculation. I wish heartily that I could remember everything that ensued upon the excellent understanding at which Sinovia and I arrived. But this, unhappily, is very vague. I have an airy and unsubstantial impression that the little devils danced in the wildest glee and arranged all the decorous details of license and minister. I know that Sinovia looked entrancingly pretty, and that as the moments passed I found it easier to prepare a speech for Alice. A misty whirling of my environment, a delicious sense of happiness and comfort, an unspeakable satisfaction in knowing that Sinovia would always be mine, a delightful sense of restfulness in the fact of her touch—all this stands out indistinctly from the haze of those strange moments. \* \* \* And then all was darkness. \* \* \*

My patient mother was standing watch at my bedside. I knew from the difficulty I felt in attempting to move and speak that I was extremely weak. Seeing me struggling to find my voice, my mother gently and playfully placed her hand over my mouth, and said:

"Not yet, my son; be quiet one day longer, and then we shall see."

I closed my eyes. It was very sweet to be lying there with the loveliest of women in attendance upon me. I took my mother's hand and kissed it, and then drifted away into slumber.

I suppose it was the following day when I awoke. My mother was still in devoted watchfulness over me. She bent down and kissed me, and asked me how I felt. Faintly I replied that I was very well.

"Do you think, dear," she asked, "that you are strong enough to receive someone who is very anxious to see you?"

Some indefinite but unpleasant recollections were quickened within me, and my mother saw my distress.

"She has a right before me," continued my mother. "She has borne most of the burden of watching you during the past ten days, in which you have been delirious. I am sure that when you know who it is you will be delighted."

To see Sinovia? Suppose those dreadful little devils should be with her? "Is she all alone, mother?" I timidly asked.

"Yes; and she refuses to stay away any longer. Here she comes."

With that entered Alice Fairweather, looking prettier and more bashful than I had ever seen her. My mother advanced, took her hand, and led her to the bedside.

"My dear," said my mother to me, "as your wife, Alice is entitled to the first place here. When you are stronger we will talk about that night when you dragged her from her gate and made her marry you;" and she left the room with a merry laugh on her lips, pleased to see my bewilderment and happiness. And I never had another attack of asthma.

#### IF I SHOULD COME.

G. L. BROWNE.

If I should come and kiss you in the night,  
When all the world in slumbering silence lies,  
Oh, dearest, would it wake you with delight,  
If I should come and kiss you in the night?  
And would you start and tremble in surprise,  
When you should wake and look into mine eyes?  
And would you smile and clasp me to your breast,  
Until my cheek upon your own should rest?  
Oh, dearest, would it wake you with delight,  
If I should come and kiss you in the night?

